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HORACE GREELE

IN 1872.

HIS POLITICAL POSITION AND MOTIVES

IN THE

LATE PRESIDENTIAL CONTEST.

BY JAMES S. PIKE.

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HORACE GREELEY

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IN the numerous notices and "recollections" of Mr. Greeley by partisan hands, since the death of that distinguished man, the intimation is often made that; not only lost caste as a Republican, but lost character by becoming the candidate of the opposition at the late election; and this chapter of his life is patronizingly passed over as one which might better be treated with silence and left to oblivion.

In the first place, no such thing is possible in a life as eminent and as conspicuous as that of Mr. Greeley. In the next, it is an impertinent imputation which every friend of his desires promptly to repel. No such forbearance is asked or desired. His friends challenge the closest scrutiny on this as on every other chapter of his eventful life. Mr. Greeley threw himself into the canvass as the determined opponent of a sordid corruption that he believed was disgracing the Republican party and destroying the public morals. The late numerous and painful public disclosures of Credit Mobilier, Senatorial, and other corruptions, that have simultaneously burst upon and astounded the country, demonstrate to the world how well founded his convictions were.

These developments throw a flood of light upon the late canvass by making plain to all what was previously

known to but comparatively few; namely, that our national politics had long been becoming thoroughly corrupt. They have also widened the basis of the knowledge possessed by those few, and more than confirmed all their worst suspicions. There is no longer any doubt that widespread rottenness prevails in our public affairs and among our public men. The question now is getting to be, how much have we left that is sound? How many States and how many Congress districts exist that are not under the control of corrupt agencies and influences?

THE BEGINNING OF PUBLIC CORRUPTION.

The fruitage season of corruption, now running to seed in Washington and all over the country, was preceded by its budding and blossoming time at the Capitol. It began in the period of war contracts in the time of Mr. Lincoln; it continued under the hybrid administration of Andrew Johnson; and flowered vigorously at the close of the war, when Gen. Grant's military and personal friends took possession of our civil affairs. Its growth was at that period viewed with the deepest concern by every observer cognizant of public affairs. The inauguration of Gen. Grant became an epoch in its progress. The instant raid then made upon the offices by a rough-shod and eager crew, who knew what they became Republicans for, was one of the most significant events in our political history. The old Republicans were everywhere immediately displaced by the new crowd.

It was not long before there came reports of numerous accomplished and attempted thefts, robberies, defalcations, and swindling transactions in the various Departments, in addition to the usual supply in Congress.

The most conspicuous of these, and the one which first excited wide attention, arose in the Post Office Department, and subsequently became notorious as the "Chorpenning Claim." Mr. Postmaster-General Creswell had deliberately sanctioned an attempt to take from the Treasury the sum of \$440,000, on a claim urged by his former law-partner, which the House of Representatives, by a nearly unanimous vote, declared fraudulent and void. This was deemed a proper occasion by some of the best Republicans in Congress to break ground, and make a resolute stand against an evidently still rising tide of corruption, which, if not checked by some concerted and authoritative measures, it was seen would soon debauch the new Executive Government, further demoralize Congress and the country, and result finally in endangering the ascendancy of the Republican party. In the event of Gen. Grant's failing to invite Mr. Creswell to resign, it was suggested that Congress should give a significant hint to that gentleman to retire. But while Congress was prompt to stamp Mr. Creswell's action as infamous, it exhibited an incredible reluctance to do anything which looked like personally antagonizing members against him. The reasons for this reluctance were not then understood, and until lately have only been but partially disclosed. They become surprisingly clear in the light of recent developments.

MR. GREELEY ENTERS THE LISTS AGAINST CORRUPTION.

It was at this period that Mr. Greeley was approached and solicited to make open proclamation against the Creswell transaction and throw the whole weight of THE TRIBUNE into a resolute demand for his removal. Mr. Greeley was at that time a warm friend and supporter of Gen. Grant and the administration. It was

urged upon him that the good name and honorable character of the Republican party demanded that Creswell should go overboard; that in no other way could so much be done to check the bold march of venality and corruption; that it was the duty of the press to call upon the President to set his face like a flint against this first open and flagrant attempt at public robbery; that it might be early understood that the new Administration would not for one moment tolerate transactions like this. It was the first actual and threatening crevasse that had opened, and it must be promptly stopped if an inundation was to be averted. Those views were enforced by suggesting the inquiry as to what would probably be Mr. Creswell's fate if, instead of Gen. Grant, Mr. Chase, or Mr. Fessenden, or Mr. Charles Francis Adams, were at the head of the administration. There was no one to contest the conclusion that in either case Mr. Creswell's place would not be worth an hour's purchase. Mr. Greeley recognized the force of the considerations alleged, and offered to print anything in aid of the object in view, and did publish some strictures on the transaction; but, as it was thought that Gen. Grant's pertinacity and pride of opinion, in the selection of his Cabinet officers, was not likely to be overcome by any mere newspaper solicitations, Mr. Greeley did not see his way clear to make such a pronounced effort as was desired. It proved subsequently that this view of the case was correct, so far as any action of Gen. Grant in the premises was concerned. For the President was afterward approached on the same subject by eminent Republicans in Congress, who were his supporters then, and who are his supporters now, and a reconstruction of his Cabinet, urged on the ground of this and other scandals of which it was argued the Republican party ought not

to bear the weight; but the attempt to secure such reconstruction signally failed, though backed by Senatorial names. The President thought that Creswell and Robeson were as good as any of the rest of his Cabinet.

HOW MR. GREELEY AIMED TO CORRECT ABUSES.

But it is not Presidential obtuseness that I wish to illustrate, but the character and position of Mr. Greeley. Always a warm partisan and an ardent supporter of the Republican party, seeking the forefront of the battle, he was not anxious to find flaws in its administration, but sought to excuse rather than condemn. He was unwilling to make sharp issues with Gen. Grant's Administration, even while condemning its tone and many of its acts. He thought there was a better way, and that friendly solicitation would serve better than indignant comment. It is known to all readers of *THE TRIBUNE*, that he pursued that course through all the Cabinet scandals, and all the carpet-bag rascalities and robberies, the irregularities and swindling operations of the vast crowd of revenue officers in New York and elsewhere, the defalcations and speculations of what was known as the "Military Ring," and the general gorging of the new tribe who had gained possession of the Government places, till at length he could stand it no longer. Mr. Greeley steadily aimed at the friendly correction of these abuses, by, as might almost be said, supporting Gen. Grant against Gen. Grant's Administration. Fully recognizing the necessity of reform, he aimed to secure it by continuing his support of the regular organization of the Republican party. Party divisions in the State of New York greatly embarrassed this line of action, and Mr. Greeley was made to feel, by the action of party managers, how unavailing were his efforts.

I mark the epoch of the Creswell transaction because it was about that time that Mr. Greeley's mind began to be more impressed with the magnitude and widespread character of the corruptions that had seized hold of the country, and which neither the precept nor the example of the national administration was calculated to check. Revolving the subject in his mind, he finally came to the conclusion that things ought not to go on in the old ruts any longer, and that a change was necessary. He accordingly avowed his opposition to Gen. Grant's renomination. He used to speak privately of affairs in Washington as being "rotten through and through" in Congress and the Departments, but especially in the Post-Office Department; and that he could see no remedy except in a complete change from top to bottom. A particular point of discouragement was that Gen. Cox's efforts to begin a civil service reform at Washington, while a member of the Cabinet, were hooted at, and cost that able and honest man his place. A man high in the long exercise of his Senatorial office at Washington used at the time to regale the willing ear of the President with his vews of the absurdity of attempting any such reform, and by volunteering his judgment that Mr. Cox was only fit to be Secretary of the Interior in the "Kingdom of Heaven." But this question afterward took on such a threatening aspect that the President felt compelled, at a late day, to declare himself a convert to the doctrine to which Cox had been sacrificed.

PARTISAN CONSIDERATIONS REJECTED.

But at length Mr. Greeley saw, what became evident to everybody, that Gen. Grant's renomination was a foreordained event; that his re-election would only per-

petuate and intensify a state of things which he was firmly persuaded had gone on already quite too long for the public good, Mr. Greeley felt that he knew. The question with him at this juncture was, whether he would bow to this coming decision of the Republican party, and support its nominee, or whether he would resist and contest the issue. Mr. Greeley's position at this time was viewed by Republicans with great interest and concern, and many doubts were expressed as to whether he would "stick." It was generally believed that his active Republican sentiments and his old strong partisan feelings would finally prevail to shape his action, and that he would, in obedience to them, do as he did in the canvass of 1848, when he determinedly opposed Gen. Taylor's nomination. At that time, after finding his opposition fruitless, he reluctantly wheeled into line and supported the ticket. It was thought he would do so now.

But the event proved this expectation groundless. Mr. Greeley gave abundant notice from time to time, in his journal, that the period had arrived when he would no longer be swayed by partisan considerations, but that he would renounce the position of party organ, and following the dictates of his own judgment and conscience, throw himself and his paper exclusively upon the general public intelligence for support. He claimed that he could not conscientiously support the continuation of the existing state of things, and would not countenance, by his voice or his vote, the men who were corruptly, as he believed, controlling public affairs. He demanded that these be given over to purer custodians. He was not tired of Republicans or Republicanism. His faith was unchanged. But he hated corruption, and he longed for honesty and purity and moral perception in

administration. He was ready to make every sacrifice and fight the battle on a forlorn hope rather than yield his convictions of what the public good demanded.

This was the position of Mr. Greeley at a period anterior to the call of a body of independent Reformers who were in motion for a convention in the interests of Civil Service and Revenue Reform.

MR. GREELEY STILL A REPUBLICAN.

It is easy to say from a partisan point of view that, in taking this position, Mr. Greeley left the Republican party. He did no such thing. He dissented from the action of a majority of its representatives, in their nomination of a candidate for President. He did this from high motives of public policy, as well as in the interest of Republicanism itself. He did not wish to overthrow it or defeat it, but to purify and vitalize it. He did not wish to undo one of its great achievements. He did not wish to modify one of its great results. He was still for emancipation, for enfranchisement, for the equal rights of all men, in behalf of which a great war had been successfully waged. He aimed at the education and elevation of the benighted children of the African race on this continent, and to see that not one right of theirs was abridged by any measure of public policy. More than this, he aimed to advance the Republican standard still further forward in the direction it had been steadily moving since the Rebellion began, and to gain in the future even greater triumphs, than it had achieved in the past. He wished to consolidate those triumphs by harmonizing the antagonisms between the two races at the South, and by softening and removing the asperities between the North and South which those

triumphs had created. He patriotically aimed at these lofty purposes in the future, thus to secure more completely the Republican achievements of the past. These were his plain, transparent, well defined, often explained motives and purposes in the position he assumed, after dissenting from the nomination of Gen. Grant.

Was this to cease to be a Republican, or was it to be more of a Republican than ever? How absurd and preposterous then to charge or to intimate that Mr. Greeley deserted his Republicanism, or changed his ground, or lowered his tone upon one single point embraced in the original creed, or any of its accretions, of the Republican party, from the beginning to the end of his luminous career.

He declined to support the Republican nomination of Gen. Grant. He did it, as we have seen, from high moral and patriotic considerations. He aimed to defeat his election, still holding to every political principle and dogma he had espoused since the founding of the Republican party. And this is all. To condemn Mr. Greeley for this, or in a review of his character to hold this conduct up for animadversion as reflecting upon his honesty or his truth, or his consistency even, is to measure him by a standard and weigh him in a scale which has no recognition among the eternities. It is only by applying a high moral standard that we can determine whether a man has acted unworthily. To refuse to go with the majority of one's party may be the height of virtue. It depends on the motive, and it depends on the object. If these be pure, the act is commendable; and it may happen that such an act is the most resplendent of a political life. Without caring to claim so much as this for Mr. Greeley, I do hold that it is only a short-sighted partisanship that can see in Mr. Greeley's

course, up to this point, anything to censure or condemn. And where such censure or such condemnation is expressed, it must be deemed rather the measure of the critic himself than of the object criticised. For those who say they cannot reconcile Mr. Greeley's position with his previous career, his friends have only to say that such a remark is tantamount to admitting an inability to understand how a high motive can prevail against a low one.

THE CANDIDATE OF THE DEMOCRACY.

But it is the complaint of Mr. Greeley's critics, not only that he declined to support the nomination of the Republican party, but that he became the candidate of their great adversary, the Democratic party, of whom Mr. Greeley himself had been the lifelong and persistent opponent. The implication from this fact is that he deserted his own and went over to the Democratic party.

While the facts alleged are notorious, the implication is wholly without foundation. A simple narrative of events as they occurred dispels the charge. His being a candidate was purely a secondary and accidental circumstance. His position, as I have endeavored to elucidate it, was taken wholly independent of this circumstance. It was assumed when he was scarcely thought of as a Presidential candidate, and when any betting man would have offered a thousand to one against his chances for such a nomination. Mr. Greeley himself was not thinking of it, but only of leading the way at the head of his great and influential journal, in protesting, in behalf of thousands and tens of thousands of thinking and earnest Republicans, against the corrup-

tions of the men who were influential leaders of the Republican party. He was polishing his weapons for a contest in which he knew he should delight, and into which he proposed to enter with his whole heart and soul. He felt his power, and he knew it was greatest in an aggressive war against corruption and incompetency, against criminality and falsehood, in the guise of political virtue. He looked for a great defection in the Republican ranks under this protesting banner. In this he differed from many of his personal friends, who believed that the public confidence in Gen. Grant remained in the main unshaken, and that when his name came again before the people all secondary considerations would be overlooked and overborne, and that he would be triumphantly elected. But Mr. Greeley would fight his battles all the same, regardless of consequences, and regardless of all temporary sacrifices, pecuniary and otherwise, that he knew his course would inevitably entail. He undoubtedly believed he was laying the foundation for a broad and successful Reform movement in the future, and that the losses now would be more than compensated by the gain hereafter. It was Mr. Greeley's intellectual habit to be always preparing the way for a better future. He was a man ever impatient for progress. He was never content to rest on accomplished results. He was always on the alert for new positions and new issues. It was a favorite theory of his that frequent political changes were useful to the public. He held that every party became corrupt by being long in power, and that this corruption was never fully probed and never destroyed except by such changes. He cared nothing for the preservation of party except as an agency to promote high principles and useful measures. He did care everything for principles; but if they were

ignored or disregarded, he cared not what became of the party that only emptily professed them.

HIS POSITION CONCERNING THE TARIFF.

There is really no reason whatever to believe Mr. Greeley anticipated any other result than that we have indicated in the opposition he had now avowed. With the people who originally proposed to meet at Cincinnati for Civil Service and Revenue Reform, Mr. Greeley had no sympathy. Their cardinal object was to make head against that protective policy which he had long warmly supported. But as a body favorable to reform in general, Mr. Greeley aimed to utilize it in the direction of such reforms as he himself favored. He thought the two classes of reformers might act harmoniously in pursuit of a common object, by agreeing each to remit the chief subject of disagreement between them, namely, the Tariff question, to the popular constituencies of the Congress Districts. It is hard to see anything blamable in this, but only a wise precaution; since practically it did not alter the position of the question in the present or in the future by a hair's breadth. But it has been made a matter of reproach to Mr. Greeley, in the allegation that he thereby abandoned his own previous position on the subject. The reproach is unmerited; since the allegation is wholly untrue. He did not abandon any position he ever occupied on the subject, and did not propose to forego its discussion or even the advocacy he had so long practiced. But Mr. Greeley was endeavoring to harmonize the elements of the opposition for the common advantage, and without reference to himself. He wanted that Convention to agree on a Presidential candidate he could support, and he did not conceal his preferences that that candidate should be

Lyman Trumbull. But he did not go to the Convention, and did not seek in the least, either by solicitation or combination, to influence its action.

But in due time, to the utter surprise of everybody, and especially of Mr. Greeley himself, it did nominate him as its candidate for the Presidency. As much of the reproach heaped upon Mr. Greeley is because he became the candidate of the opposition, we should like to ask just here, what was Mr. Greeley to do in these circumstances? He certainly was not to blame for his nomination. He had not contrived it; he had not anticipated it. The result was a spontaneous judgment of the majority at Cincinnati that he was the most fit man to be nominated. Was he to repel this judgment? Was he to withdraw, and say he would not run? It is none too much to say that he could with propriety do neither. Of all men in the movement, it was not for him to balk at the first step of the Convention, and thus interpose an obstacle to its success by discrediting its judgment. Mr. Greeley, then, was in no sense responsible for his own nomination, and thus deserves no reproach for it. He had it thrust upon him, and he could not escape its consequences. No conditions were attached to it, and no promises exacted. He was taken on a position he had long before marked out for himself, when he originally resolved on fighting the battle in the ranks, in behalf of whoever might lead.

HIS POSITION CONSISTENT THROUGHOUT.

Neither, because the Democrats subsequently thought it for their interest to confirm the nomination and to accept Mr. Greeley for their candidate, is it to be imputed to him for a crime. He was but the passive recipient of unexpected honors from his old adversaries. Their

action did not change his own self-chosen position, or swerve him from his principles. He did not become a Democrat or a representative of Democracy by accepting the nomination. He was the same Horace Greeley and the same Republican as before, and would have so remained had the fates been propitious and placed him in the Presidential chair. It was his own lofty and independent position, his daring declarations of determined freedom from party shackles when they would bind him to support what he abhorred and execrated, that extorted the admiration of his old foes, and won the support of such of them as could be moved by sentiments of magnanimity toward so noble and fearless a leader. Unhappily these did not comprise the whole of the Democratic party. There were numerous Democrats in every State, who, in the zeal of their partisanship, opposed him to the end, and threw State after State into the hands of Gen. Grant's friends. They at least believed Gen. Grant to be a better Democrat than Mr. Greeley. They knew that Mr. Greeley had never belonged to the Democratic party, had never joined it, had never qualified his hostility to its views in every issue it had ever raised with the Republican party in the past, and for these reasons they refused their support to his nomination. It was these Democrats who would not go over to Mr. Greeley's position, and yield him their support, who compassed his defeat. They declined being parties to the sacrifice that the Baltimore Convention of the representatives of the party were willing to make, and did make, as the declaration of principles they adopted amply attests. Mr. Greeley himself stood firm in his own place—that of a consistent, pronounced, distinctive, but liberal and non-partisan Republican. This is not left to conjecture or assertion. His writings and

his speeches, during the canvass, from first to last, at once luminous and copious, all show it, and are an everlasting testimony to his truth, his consistency, and his unswerving fidelity to his principles and his convictions.

No friend of his is perplexed as to his motives, or in doubt as to his inspirations, or questions the perfect integrity of his acts. His pathway needs no hedge to conceal devious and labyrinthine ways. His road was clear and open and plain to all who do not choose to be blinded by the fogs of a shallow partisanship. It is at once an insult to his memory and an insult to the personal and political friends who supported him through the Presidential contest, either to charge or to intimate that his reputation and his honor are best conserved by throw a veil over the most prominent facts and circumstances of his whole political life. His friends say, No! Uncover everything. Let all be told. Conceal nothing. We challenge the sharpest scrutiny. But why say even this? There is nothing to scrutinize that the broad light of open day does not already shine upon and reveal, and the impartial biographer and historian of the future, when he shall review Mr. Greeley's life and character, will find no flaw therein, and will be compelled to pronounce the inevitable verdict: "Well done, good and faithful servant."



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